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Soviet talks a his business

By Charles S. Ward
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In February 1983 a letter was sent to more than 125,000 Soviet immigrants who had entered America since 1970.

About 3,800 immigrants answered and, with funds from the CIA and Defense Department, were interviewed about the everyday life in the Soviet Union.

Mark Swords, 24, a former Auran living in Naperville, became an interviewer and interpreter for the project, which was fostered by the National Opinion Research Center.

Some interviews, Swords said, lasted six hours.

The interviews were conducted in Russian, a language Swords speaks fluently.

The 1970s had been an era of détente. Most of the immigrants were Russian Jews who had been allowed to leave Russia to go to Israel, their homeland, during a thaw during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

Historically, there has been much discrimination against Jews in Russia.

The National Opinion Research Center was a consortium of 10 universities, including Yale, Harvard, Princeton, University of Illinois and University of Chicago.

It was continuing a project begun earlier by Harvard University scholars attempting to learn how to negotiate with the Russians.

Often U.S. negotiators were unsure of what Russians wanted from a given situation and were taken advantage of.

Wanted were Soviet citizens "who had a unique story to tell" to Western economists, political scientists, sociologists and students of contemporary society, the letter from National Opinion Research Center said.

An East High School graduate, Swords had traveled in Russia and attended the University of Lenin-grad.

From 1978 to 1983 he learned to speak and read Russian at the University of Illinois and Indiana University's Slavic workshop. He was

at the University of Chicago when he was tapped to interview immigrants.

Swords interviewed 40 Russian immigrants during six months of grueling work.

"I was emotionally drained when it was over. For weeks I walked the streets of New York for 12 hours a day," he said.

Interviews were in Chicago and New York City — mostly in Brooklyn, Queens and suburban Brighton Beach, where immigrants congregated.

"Those in Brooklyn and Queens earned from \$55,000 to \$60,000 a year and thought the United States was great," Swords said.

"But those in Brighton Beach were unemployed, simple workers caught in the recession and they wanted to go back to Russia."

"What good is freedom when we live where health situations are terrible, transportation is rundown and there is rampant crime in the streets," one immigrant told him.

Sometimes Swords inadvertently provoked fear among the immigrants. Swords tells of knocking on doors all over New York City, sometimes going from door-to-door.

Behind some doors he heard panicky breathing, and no one came to the door.

It took all of Swords' persuasive powers to get immigrants to discuss Soviet life.

He promised them that the data would be confidential, that their names would not be associated with the information.

All information gathered by interviewers was packed up and sent to Canada — out of U.S. jurisdiction — and will be burned when the project is complete, Swords said.

"It was strictly academic," he said.

"Although the CIA and Defense Department agencies paid for the project, only scholars will be allowed to use it. Books and articles will be published.

Swords said he began studying Russian on a whim, "then I became mesmerized by the literature and intrigued by how artists survive in a totalitarian state."

Swords spent nearly five months in Moscow and Kiev.

"It's a whole different world," he said. "It is a horrible system — repressed, bugs in your room, you just can't imagine," Swords said.

Yet the people had a philosophical freedom Americans don't have, he said.

The "freedom" is formed by the economics of the country.

"By living a long time in cramped quarters, people tend to live inwardly, and they have a broader cultural base upon which to build the inner values," he said.

These facets are bolstered by an education system that immigrants told Swords was better in the fundamentals than the United States system.

However, there is no medicine, and crime is higher than supposed, with wife-beating leading the list.

The two newspapers, Pravda and Izvestia, — "Truth" and "The News" — are bad.

A common Russian saying is, "There is no truth in The News and no news in The Truth."

Swords said he was enchanted by the Russian literature, artists and writers battling against inhuman odds of censorship and repression and even death.

"Russians have never really known what it is to have private property," he said.

Russian czars awarded land to those who served the state. Even Peter the Great believed he existed only for the state.

Swords said he learned a lot about Russia, but even more about his own country.

"And I learned how strong the human spirit really was.

"Man can really overcome any situation; like an artist trying to express himself under repression," he said.